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Tracking Putin's Most Feared Secret Agency—From Inside a Russian Prison and Beyond

spy unit that arrested a Wall Street Journal reporter is leading the biggest campaign of inte repression since the Stalin era

By Evan Gershkovich Follow | *With Drew Hinshaw* Follow, *Joe Parkinson* Follow *and Thomas Grove* Follow

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ABOARD A RUSSIAN PRESIDENTIAL JET—The spy at the front of the cabin drew open the curtain.

Wearing a sand-colored jacket and brown shoes, with a salt-and-pepper goatee, the man had spent the past few hours organizing the final preparations for the largest East-West prisoner swap since the Cold War. Now, as the pilots started the engines to take off for an airport in Turkey's capital, he came out to look at the 16 prisoners he was escorting to freedom, a haul of Americans, Russians and Germans in their first hours fresh from jails and penal colonies.

Scanning the passengers, he locked his eyes squarely on one of those prisoners—me. He said nothing, staring in silence for nearly a minute. Then he turned and walked back to his curtained-off section of the presidential jet. I was left to wonder about this man at the helm of the exchange, who appeared to hold my fate in his hands.

When I was arrested by Russia's security forces in 2023—the first foreign correspondent charged with espionage since the Cold War—I never stopped reporting. On my release I set out to identify the man who had taken me, and to learn more about the spy unit that had carried out his orders.

During my 16 months' imprisonment, colleagues at The Wall Street Journal had been asking parallel questions.

Together, we have identified the man behind the curtain as Lt. Gen. Dmitry Minaev and can now reveal a trove of fresh details about the unit that he runs: the Department for

Counterintelligence Operations. Known as DKRO, it is at the very core of Russian President Vladimir Putin's opaque wartime regime. The story of how it got there reveals much about how Russia's autocratic system became entangled in a broiling conflict with the West.

Among our findings:

- DKRO has played an enormous and unreported role in plunging Russia into its biggest wave of repression since the demise of Joseph Stalin, including a purge of the Defense Ministry after Putin's invasion of Ukraine faltered.
- The department was ordered to secure the release from Germany of Vadim Krasikov, a Russian hit man convicted in the 2019 assassination of a Putin enemy in a Berlin park.
- DKRO then accelerated a campaign of arresting American citizens on Russian soil, including basketball star Brittney Griner. DKRO used former U.S. Marine Paul Whelan and me as trade bait to secure the release of Krasikov.
- Among DKRO's other missions was to harass and surveil Western diplomats in Russia, even pressuring students in the U.S. Embassy high school to spy on their classmates.

Despite DKRO's growing importance to the regime, there was almost no mention of the agency anywhere on the internet until the Journal reported last year that it was behind my arrest. It didn't even have a Wikipedia page. Almost nobody outside of a tight circle of Russia experts and intelligence officers had ever heard of it.

The more we tugged at this simple question—*who in Russia was arresting Americans?*—the more we revealed the secret inner machinery that has made it possible for Putin to tighten the screws across Russia's 11 time zones, creating what a U.N. special rapporteur on human rights called an atmosphere of political persecution "unprecedented in recent history."

DKRO, one person familiar with the unit's operations said, was like the axle on a car. Without it, the entire machine would cease to function.

Though it numbers only about 2,000 officers, according to U.S. and European officials, DKRO is the Kremlin's most elite security force. It wields the power to compel hundreds of thousands of personnel across Russia into surveilling, intimidating, or arresting foreigners and the Russians it suspects of working with them. DKRO officers are generously paid, even by the standards of Russia's powerful and sprawling Federal Security Service, or FSB, of which it is part.

They enjoy bonuses for successful operations and access to low-cost mortgages, even the best time slots at Russia's beachside resorts. Not a single DKRO officer is known to have defected to the West, according to U.S. and European officials.

Turkish officials at the Ankara airport on Aug. 1 during the largest East-West prisoner swap since the Cold War.
PHOTO: FSB/TASS/ZUMA PRESS

To understand how power really flows in Putin's security state, we tracked the unseen rise of this shadowy unit of elite spies. We spoke to Russians and Westerners targeted by DKRO, and U.S. and European security and intelligence officials and diplomats who have tried to learn its secrets. Former Russian security officials, exiles and dissidents added their own takes.

Along the way, two of my Journal colleagues were openly followed through the streets of Vienna and Washington in acts of surveillance apparently designed to intimidate. In the hours after one article was published, they were inundated with hundreds of spam emails alongside password-reset attempts. One reporter received a message through an intermediary that the FSB wanted to invite him to Moscow for questioning. The Russian foreign ministry would later label two of them as persona non grata.

At home, DKRO has ordered the arrests of hundreds of Russians accused of spying, collaborating or treason. After Putin's invasion of Ukraine faltered, the agency largely responsible for its planning—the FSB—won an internal power struggle over who should take the blame, according to U.S. and European officials.

DKRO, along with the FSB's military-intelligence wing, led a purge of the Defense Ministry, Western security officials said. Dozens of defense officials were accused of corruption. In a chilling historical echo, many were bundled into Lefortovo—the infamous Moscow prison

where DKRO's Stalin-era predecessors sent purged Communists and Nazi spies to be tortured and executed.

In March 2023, I was taken into the same prison by a group of FSB operatives that oversee Rosgvardia, Russia's National Guard, known as Military Unit 3600, under DKRO's command.

It was a unique vantage point to observe how such a small cadre of officers has managed to help turn the world's largest country into a tightly controlled police state. The 9-by-12-foot cells of the maximum-security facility were regularly welcoming new Russian officials and accused collaborators arrested under DKRO's supervision for spying on behalf of the West or colluding with Ukraine. So many people have been jailed there on espionage or treason cases since the start of the war that FSB officials with the First Investigative Department told me they had doubled their staffing.

It was at Lefortovo that I came to understand the power of the shadowy force that had taken away my freedom. In one of the First Investigative Department's offices, under the watch of two portraits of Putin and a third of Felix Dzerzhinsky, the founder of the Soviet Union's first secret police service, the chief investigator on my case explained that I had been arrested and charged as a CIA agent because DKRO had said that's what I was. "That's enough for me," the investigator said.

Death to Spies

DKRO is rooted in some of the Soviet Union's bloodiest and most ruthless traditions.

In World War II, as Nazi agents infiltrated the Soviet Union, Stalin developed an umbrella counterintelligence agency meant to catch the spies wreaking havoc behind the front lines.

The agency, named SMERSH, a Russian abbreviation for *Smert' Shpionam*, or Death to Spies, developed a toolbox of tricks meant to identify the Nazi collaborators and lure them into elaborate traps where they were taken prisoner or killed.

With the war's end, SMERSH was folded back into the secret services agency that became the KGB. After the breakup of the Soviet Union, the KGB collapsed as well, split into three separate and competing agencies by President Boris Yeltsin.

Putin ran one of those agencies, the FSB, and when he became president in 2000 it emerged on top. His first FSB director, Nikolai Patrushev, came to see Russia as a fortress besieged by

the West and elevated DKRO's role in monitoring visiting American businesspeople and diplomats, according to a former chief of a European intelligence agency.

Visiting the FSB's Lubyanka headquarters to address its board each spring, there is one data point Putin almost always reads aloud: the number of spies captured over the preceding 12 months. The statistic carries a thinly veiled imperative, that next year's number should surpass the last.

In 2011, Russian security forces said they caught 199 individuals spying on behalf of the Kremlin's adversaries. By 2020: 495. At least 53 Russians were known to have been convicted of treason in the first eight months of this year alone, compared with just four in 2018. They include Ksenia Karelina, a Russian-American spa receptionist and ballerina from Los Angeles, sentenced to 12 years in August for donating $51.80 to a charity supporting Ukraine.

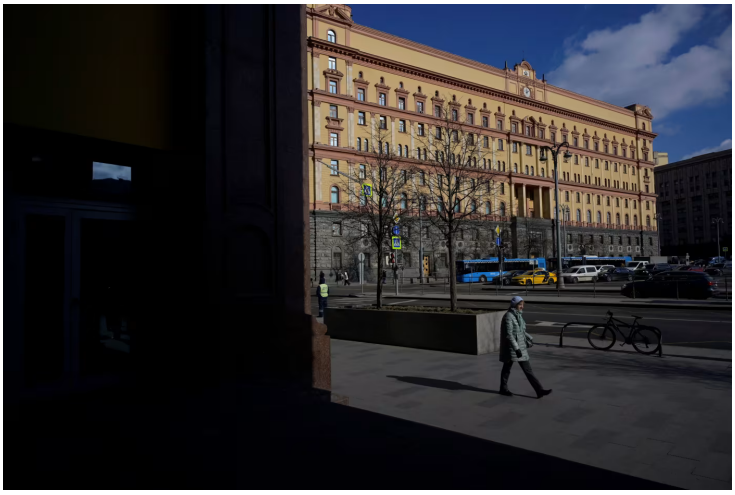
"Because foreigners are now enemies, we always have to catch them," said Mikhail Kasyanov, prime minister during Putin's first term and now an opposition figure, in an interview. "Or make them up."

Neither the Kremlin nor the FSB responded to requests for comment.

Not long ago, policing economic crimes, not quashing dissent, paved the path to power for an officer in Russia's FSB. Officers could extort contracts or business deals by opening a spurious investigation. At one point before the war, the FSB was probing one in six Russian businessmen.

Today, espionage and treason cases are the most valuable currency for ambitious FSB officers. The spy agency's alumni so dominate Russia's elite that some 80% of Putin's top-level officials are current or former members of the security forces, including the FSB.

In the final years of the Soviet Union, the comparable number was just 3%, according to sociologist Olga Kryshtanovskaya.



The headquarters of Russia's Federal Security Service, the FSB, in central Moscow. PHOTO: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

As the war supercharged the presidential appetite for spies and traitors—real or imagined—the job of satisfying it fell to DKRO. Putin's invasion gave DKRO an "entirely new raison d'etre...catching spies at home and going head-to-head with U.S. intelligence in Ukraine," said Boris Volodarsky, a former Russian military-intelligence officer who is now a fellow at London's Royal Historical Society.

DKRO isn't the only agency on the hunt: As the war in Ukraine rumbles on, institutions of all sizes are expected to report suspicions upward. Like a stage manager behind the curtain, DKRO's role is to design and orchestrate operations yet rarely be seen. To do this, it borrows top officers from other FSB departments for specific tasks, then rotates them out.

"Once the team is assembled they're given carte blanche," said a Russian former counterintelligence officer, who worked in a different agency. "They have access to technology, they might have technology support staff, and they'll have whatever cover they need."

DKRO leaders also enjoy rare access to Putin himself. One of the few Russian officials privileged enough to play ice hockey with the president is the head of the FSB's first service, which oversees DKRO, Lt. Gen. Vladislav Menschikov. He personally briefed Putin before and after my arrest, the Journal reported while I was incarcerated. Barely known outside a small circle of Russia analysts, the spy chief previously ran the presidential directorate responsible for Russia's nuclear bunkers.

His subordinate, who runs DKRO itself—the goateed Lt. Gen Minaev—has a hands-on role in

selecting which Americans to arrest, and which Russians to trade them for. Awarded the prestigious Hero of Russia medal for bravery during Russia's war in Chechnya, he is described by intelligence chiefs who have met him as frighteningly perceptive. "He understands everything about his environment—everything," said one Western officer who has met him several times. "He knows immediately who is a shark and who is a pussy."

Minaev usually stays in the shadows, but he was present from the beginning to the end of the Aug. 1 swap. I first saw him when I was escorted from the Lefortovo prison onto a gray coach with other prisoners on the morning of the exchange. At 10:30 a.m., Minaev climbed aboard and stood at the front, resting his arms on the backs of two seats on either side of the aisle. He was a representative of the FSB, he announced, and we prisoners were gathered for an exchange. He didn't give his name.

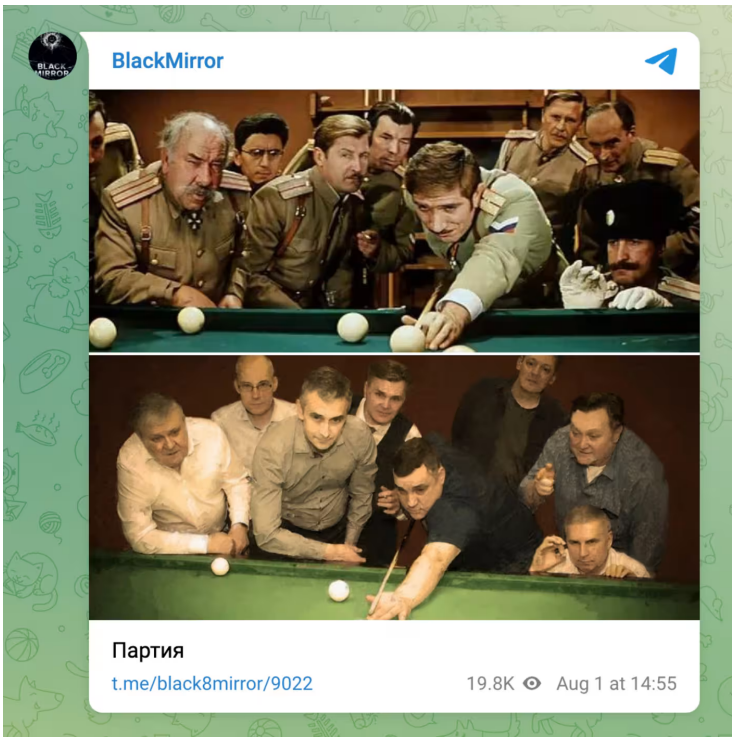
The longtime intelligence officer who accompanied him was formerly head of the DKRO subdivision that tracks foreign journalists, its "Tenth Department." Sergei Latkov now works for Putin at the presidential administration, according to flight manifests seen by the Journal.

Sergei Latkov and Vadim Krasikov arrive in Moscow after the prisoner swap on Aug. 1. PHOTO: MIKHAIL VOSKRESENSKY/TASS/ZUMA PRESS

Latkov was the first Russian official Putin welcomed when the presidential jet returned to Moscow, carrying the Russian prisoners the West freed in exchange: a collection of deep-cover spies, hackers, and a hit man.

On the day of the swap, the Russian dissident hacking group Black Mirror, which sells data about Russian officials, posted on its Telegram channel a purported photo featuring Latkov

and Alexei Komkov, the former head of DKRO who now runs the FSB's foreign-intelligence wing, playing billiards. The tableau was reminiscent of a scene from a Soviet action movie, "The Elusive Avengers," with the spies posing as the bad guys. Black Mirror also posted a still from that scene, under the tagline: "The Game."



The hacking group Black Mirror posted on its Telegram channel a purported photo featuring DKRO officials and others, bottom, posing in a scene reminiscent of a Soviet-era film, top.

U.S. officials blame DKRO for a string of strange incidents that blurred the lines between spycraft and harassment, including the mysterious death of a U.S. diplomat's dog, the trailing of an ambassador's young children and flat tires on embassy vehicles.

In 2020, a DKRO officer told a local student at the U.S. Embassy school in Moscow, popular among the capital's foreign diplomatic corps, that his mother had been detained and would be released only if the student started hanging out with those named on a list of diplomats' children, and reported on their families' hobbies and vacation plans. Russian authorities later ordered the school closed.

There is another set of visitors the unit has taken a keen interest in: middle-aged American men with military or defense-contracting careers, flying in to be with younger Russian women, or occasionally men, they've met online or through dating apps. Several months before Putin invaded Ukraine, America's Moscow embassy sent a memo to Washington

warning that the number of Russian women requesting K-1 fiancée visas to marry American men with security clearances was statistically improbable.

The German Foreign Ministry in March cautioned its nationals visiting Russia to "be careful with Tinder, Hinge, Bumble and the like," noting that "Russia is currently not the best travel destination for a first date with an online flirt."

DKRO's officers also increasingly operate on foreign soil, recruiting spies and conducting sabotage operations in Eastern Europe. In former Soviet states, DKRO has organized kidnappings, Eastern European officials say. When foreigners cross key border points, like the Estonian Narva post where the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's boundaries meet Russian soil, DKRO has local FSB officers systematically interrogate them, hoping to recruit or threaten visitors into spying on their homelands. Officers working for the unit once dashed across the border, setting off a smoke grenade then dragging an Estonian security official into Russia for use in a later trade for a Russian spy held by Estonia.

As part of Russia's campaign in Ukraine, DKRO is sabotaging railroads and gathering intelligence on high-ranking officials, likely to prepare assassination attempts or targeted acts of violence, a Western intelligence official said. Ukrainian officials say it was Minaev himself who ordered officers to detonate two car bombs in Kyiv in 2017. The blasts killed officials from the country's military and domestic intelligence agencies, the HUR and the SBU. Minaev was also behind an unsuccessful attempt to assassinate intelligence chief Kyrylo Budanov, Ukrainian officials said.

But the agency's primary focus is internal, where Russia's growing conflict with the West has only intensified Putin's obsession with spies. One former Russian intelligence officer described an extraordinary twist: The president at one point established a counterintelligence committee to look for collaborators among the ranks of counterintelligence agencies looking for collaborators among ordinary Russians.

DKRO has managed "to make counterintelligence the pre-eminent FSB branch," said Andrei Soldatov, the exiled founder of investigative website Agentura.ru, "and vital for protecting the political regime."

—Bojan Pancevski contributed to this article.

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